

Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

From hay ropes to cell phones: Growing up in Ripon

By Pat Grahn

Growing up in the community of Ripon has changed over the years. Students once passed hand-written notes on scraps of paper in school while today casual communication happens utilizing text messaging.

Ripon didn't see the wide use of television until the 1960s. In the early days of television, there were only three television stations (2, 5 and 11 out of Green Bay) and families only had one TV, which was found in the family living room.

The community has gone from having no telephones to land lines, as well as coin operated pay telephones. Today, many young children have their own individual cell phones.

During the summer break from school, there were not a lot of organized sports and almost none for girls until the mid-1970s. Children played on the streets without supervision and were told to come home either when it got dark or when the city street lights came on.

Charles "Chuck" E. Hoffman (1916-1999) wrote about growing up in Ripon during the 1920s and 1930s in a 1986 memoir, which was found in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society.

Hoffman was the youngest of seven siblings. The Hoffman family moved in 1919 to 521 Liberty St. The house had a barn, which was not unusual as these city barns were utilized for animals such as horses for transportation, a family milk cow and chickens for eggs.

Hoffman wrote about one of his first memories, saying, "Carleton Mathwig and I rigged up a hay rope from the diamond window in the top of the barn (approximately 25-30 foot high) to the cherry tree near the kitchen window. A pulley with a

rope holding a board for a seat completed the ride. ... It was a rather exciting 100 foot trip.

"One of us would hold the thing while the other climbed aboard; then it was off to the races. We did have enough sense to leave some slack in the line so we could drag our feet before crashing into the cherry tree. We both got two or three trips in before Mom saw one of us whizzing by the kitchen window. One of the few times I recall her raising her voice."

Hoffman wrote in the summer that "swimming was a big part of our life. ... Silver Creek was made a few inches deeper in spots by kid-made dams. I recall one near the bridge on the old Berlin Road where the water got to be 3 feet deep. Of course, this meant that we should build a diving board about 3 foot high over the water."

Silver Creek can be accessed near the Berlin Road, where the creek crosses West Oshkosh and North Union streets.

Hoffman recalled that attending high school football games in the fall "on weekends was a must. Of course money was in short supply so we had to resort to trickery to get in.

"The fence was not much of an obstacle. Five or 10 kids rushed from one side of the field, Fred Toll and a few senior guards would rush over to stop them, then about 50 would rush in and scatter in the crowd. Fred would finally throw in the towel and not try to stop anyone. It was almost as much fun as watching the game."

Fred Toll (1899-1969) was a Ripon teacher for 41 years. Ripon High School football games always have been played at Ingalls Field at the corners of St. Wenceslaus and E. Fond du Lac streets.

Hoffman recalled the year that he and a friend purchased



CHARLES "CHUCK" E. Hoffman, shown here in a 1930s photograph, wrote about growing up in Ripon in a 1986 memoir. Hoffman graduated from Ripon High School in 1935, attended Ripon College from 1938 until 1941, and during World War II served in both the Royal Canadian Air Force and the U.S. Army Air Corps.

submitted photo

a BB gun for a dollar.

"Just getting the money together for it was quite a feat," he wrote. "Mom couldn't figure out why the chickens weren't laying very much for several weeks. (Duvall's grocery gave us 10 cents a dozen for the eggs.) The gun got us into more trouble than we cared to admit.

"We had this mean old rooster that I used to torment. ... He provided a moving target that jumped about 3 feet. Fortunately, the gun had very little power, so we figured that it just stung."

However one Sunday when his sister took a bite of her chicken dinner "out rolled a BB. It went around the plate several times, sort of like a marble on a roulette wheel. The silence was deafening. ... Dad looked over the top of his glasses. ... No further action was taken by Dad for that look said it all!"

Hoffman noted that he put the BB gun aside as he aged and utilized a .22 rifle.

"I would take off down to Silver Creek, shooting at tin cans, sparrows and pieces of wood or a bottle tossed into the creek," he said. "It showed us how much damage a very small rifle can do."

He continued that "Saturdays were always special. We would take off down the creek. An old salt shaker, matches and a jackknife were all we needed for the day-long hike. Lunch consisted of crayfish, cooked in a gallon can we found along the creek, and cooked to bright



THIS PHOTO DATED July 19, 1920 was found in the Hoffman family file in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society. Pictured are, from left, Norma Zick (1913-2001), Charles Hoffman (1916-1999) and Carl Zick (1914-1975)

submitted photo

red. When we peeled and with a little salt, it tasted like lobster. Melons, apples and other fruits in season took care of many lunches."

Hoffman's brother, Orville (1908-1997), "put up the tree house in the box-elder tree by the barn. It provided many happy hours; we remodeled it a number of times. The next project was an underground club house built in the abandoned mill race."

With the help of another friend Hoffman stated, "We pulled a long tree across the end of the race. ... It was shaped like a 'U', smaller branches at right angles formed the roof. Branches with leaves closed it in, then some sod to hold it down, a sort of fireplace in the back and we were in business. ... Our biggest development turned out to be the result of a windstorm. Mrs. Zapp had this old swayback barn that blew down."

Carefully taking out the nails and neatly stacking the lumber, Hoffman and a friend moved everything to a spot at a friend's yard.

"We put up a one-story ranch style about 5'x6' square. The fireplace was a combination brick, stone and metal, scrounged up in the area. Boxes served as tables and chairs and other furnishings were acquired on a cast-off basis. Many happy hours were spent playing cards, popping corn and plotting our next move. The shack was still standing when I got out of service in 1945."

Hoffman noted that his brother, Orville, gave him his old bike. He stated that he "ran that thing on every kind of trail you could imagine. The demise of the bike came when I did my weekly job of emptying ashes and sweeping the stairs at Dr. Johnson's office (10 cents a week and no benefits). I left the bike at the curb and someone ran over the wheels. Kaput!"

Hoffman also wrote that he learned to drive "on Dad's old Hudson, by-guess-and-by-gosh." He finished his memoir by saying, "I would not trade my life experiences for anything."

Hoffman graduated from Ripon High School in 1935 and attended Ripon College for three years. He worked at Barlow & Seelig, known today as "Alliance Laundry Systems."

He enlisted into the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1941 and then in 1942, the U.S. Army Air Corps. He flew with the 451st bomb group in Europe during World War II. After the war ended, he returned to Ripon and then moved to Redwood City, Calif., remaining there with his wife, June, and their children.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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THE HOFFMAN HOUSE, circa 1920s, is located at 521 Liberty St. Charles E. Hoffman was the youngest of seven siblings who lived in the home with his parents William and Marie Hoffman. His sister Leona Hoffman (1904-2005) was an avid gardener and lived in the home until she passed away.

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